

Decay and Distortion in the Family of The Mennons in Mourning Becomes Electra

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“Human beings are great and terrible creatures when they are in the grip of great passions and that the spectacle of them is not only absorbing but also and at once horrible and cleansing”, the very absorbing lines by Joseph Wood Krutch in the introduction of *Nine Plays* (O’Neill, *Nine Plays*, Pxx), make it clear as to how these passions are responsible for the destruction of whole humanity. The World of Mennons in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is badly shattered as the characters start following the dictates of their ‘Actual Will’ and disregard their ‘Real Will’. The relationships sets distort even with the inequality springing in terms of material, differences of age, bodily strength, quality of mind and privileges of honour and power. In case of husband- wife relationship, the unequal descent of the two inevitably comes in the way of their harmonious relationship. Unsocial and unnatural relationship comes into being when man finds himself to follow his ‘Real Will’ and accept the commands of his ‘Actual Will’.

The main conflict starts in *Mourning becomes Electra*, when Christine, the mother of Lavinia, falls in love with a Captain Adam Brant and is plotting to murder her husband, Ezra Mannon on his arrival from the war front. Christine quarrels with her husband on the night of his home coming and he is stricken with a heart attack. Christine substitutes poison for his medicine and he died. Here, it becomes clear that she has started following the dictates of her ‘actual will’ and discard her ‘real will’.

The distortion in the family sets in due to the inequality springing from the unequal descent of Ezra Mennon and Christine comes in the way of harmonious relationship between the husband and wife. Christine’s descent explains her liberal attitude—the French and traditionally a passionate people. Christine’s hate of her husband in turn gives rise to the feeling of hatred in her for her daughter:

I never could make myself feel you were born of anybody but his... (O’Neill, *Nine Plays*, 840)

Christine tries to convince Orin, on his return from war about Lavinia’s abnormal state of mind, so that Lavinia might never succeed in convincing Orin about the real cause of their father’s death. She does not care for the future of her son and daughter and is ready to desert them and join Adam in matrimony and take her share of the Mannon Estate. She is unable to establish harmony between her self-regarding and altruistic instincts and her relation with other members of the family rot. O’Neill here shows that people who follows the command of their ‘actual will’ and disregards their ‘real will’ grab every opportunity to fulfill their selfish desires.

Lavinia is a typical product of the society she lives in. She is a case of repressed emotions and is jealous of her father’s affection for her mother. To quote Christine:

You’ve tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin. You’ve always

schemed to steal my place. (O'Neill, *Nine Plays*,19)

To this Lavinia reacts wildly and says that it was Christine who have stolen all love from her since the time she was born. Sexual jealousy is also at the root of decay in mother-daughter relationship. She loves Adam as well just to outwit her mother. Similarly aided by her brother's over-sensitive nature she drives him to commit suicide and in this way gets him out of her way.

Lavinia's self-imprisonment is merely a surrogate for suicide. She even denies herself the last chance to be happy by refusing to marry Peter. O'Neill here shows that the concept of honour and the feeling of jealousy were unknown to man in the state of nature. Hence, there was complete harmony in the state of nature. But, when the institution of family came into being, the concept of honour and the emotions of jealousy, love and hate began to govern her action resulting in distortion and decay, ever her end. After the death of his mother, Orin becomes a nervous wreck. He is incessantly obsessed by the idea that he drives his mother to commit suicide:

I drove her to it. I wanted to torture her. She couldn't forgive me. Why did I have boast about killing him? Why-? (O'Neill, *Nine Plays*,35).

The sentiments expressed by Orin, are exactly the same as expressed by Christine to Adam. Orin pours out his innerself when he makes proposal of incestuous relationship to his sister Lavinia:

How else can I be sure you won't leave me? You would never dare leave me- then! You would feel as guilty then as I do. You would be as damned as I am! (O'Neill, *Nine Plays*, 33)

O'Neill here shows that caught in the web of love, hate and guilt. They have come to possess

perverted and unsocial desires which are, in turn, at the root of distortion and decay in relationship. Besides, the women in the play refuse to be treated as a material thing . the sentiment expressed by Christine to Ezra in the last act of 'Homecoming', when she was goading him to fury just before his murder is echoed by Lavinia: ' *I am not your property*'. (MBE,34), When Orin tries to prevent her from marrying Peter in the second Act of 'The Haunted'. O'Neil here indicts Americans, for that matter people off all cultures, for unsocial and unnatural relationships which come into being when man finds himself unable to follow his 'real will' and accepts the commands of his 'actual will' which aims at improper and unsocial relationship resulting in disharmony. After the death of Christine, Orin becomes a nervous wreck. He is incessantly obsessed by the idea that he drove his mother to commit suicide:

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Lavinia fears that he may confess that he is responsible for Christine death. Due to this fear Lavinia takes him to his ideal Island, but nothing attracts or diverts his mind from his guilt consciousness. He tells Peter:

But they turned out to be Vinnie's Island. not mine. They only made me sick- and the naked women disgusted me. I guess I'am too much of a Mannon, after all, to turn into a pagan. (O'Neill, *Nine Plays*, 831)

He thinks that Lavinia has fallen in love with one of the natives and lusts with him and so he hastens back home, saying that he would like to face his ghosts and rid himself of his guilt obsession. But what happens to him here is that his obsession becomes too horrible. He cannot face God's light- the natural light of the sun-

when he is writing the history of the Mennons, particularly their crimes:

I hate the daylight. It's like an accusing eye...perpetual night- darkness of death in life-that's the fitting habitat for guilt; (O'Neill, *Nine Plays*,837)

While Orin and Lavinia were on the Island, Orin grew jealous of Lavinia's happy life there. How can he see her loving and living happily here that she feels that she is in his accomplice? He cannot bear the idea that Lavinia should leave him and join Peter in matrimony. Orin attempted seduction dies in its own disgust. Lavinia curses him like anything:

I hate you; I wish you were dead; you're too vile to live; you'd kill yourself, if you weren't a coward. (O'Neill, *Nine Plays*,40)

These words work their influence on Orin like wild fire and he commits suicide. It been said: "Actually, the Mennons are not so much persons(it is difficult to think of them eating, drinking and sleeping as walking passions, for they are totally defined by their loves, hunger and hostilities." (Sheaffer, Louis. O'Neill: *Son and Artist*, 371.)

The Mennons are caught in their private hell, the family circle draws tighter around their mutual guilt. The pattern of isolation and introversion which their guilt imposes on them is reflected in the tightening circle of relationships among the members of the family. Adam and Christine have plotted to remove Ezra, Orin and Lavinia conspire to murder Adam Brant. Orin murders to avenge his father and to reclaim his mother's affection. Lavinia co-operates as accomplice in order to revenge her father, to pay Adam back for spurning her and to punish her mother for stealing both her loves -Ezra and Adam. To quote Christine: "God won't leave us alone. He twists and wrings and tortures our lives with others' lives

until -we poison each other to death" (O'Neill, *Nine Plays*, 46). O'Neill through the introduction of the Islands in the play seems to suggest that the only cure for the malady lies in man's going back to nature. As, in fact, man's going back to nature is not possible now, the only solution to the problem of distortion and decay in relationship lies in the 'Theory of General Will' propounded by Rousseau. It has rightly been observed by Robert F. Whitman about the play *Mourning Becomes Electra*:

The essentially incestuous relationships which control much of the action of the play may send the unwary reader to his Freud, but it will be a fruitless trip. It is true that O'Neill hoped "to get modern psychological approximation of Greek sense of fate". into the play but he also said that *Mourning Becomes Electra* would have been "almost exactly as if I had never heard of Freud or Jung or others". It is not a play about incest or even neurosis- these are just the symptoms of a much more basic disease. Basic spontaneous 'natural' drives, thwarted by the Mannons' denial of life". Find outlet in tortured abnormal relationships. And these relationships also serve to illuminate the divisive inner conflicts of the major characters. (31)

Works Cited

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